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## IO Legitimation and the Use of Force

Principal Investigator: Alexander Thompson

The recent conflict in Iraq illustrates the important role of international organizations in the conduct of foreign policy and use of force. International support for the intervention hinged as much on United Nations approval as on the substantive goals of the policy itself. American leaders were aware of the benefits of U.N. authorization, and framed many of their arguments for war in terms of compliance with U.N. resolutions.

In this project, Thompson set out to explain why the endorsement of an international organization (IO) such as the United Nations plays such a key role. Why did foreign leaders and publics care whether the United States got U.N. support for its actions?

The answer to these questions rests on the notion of legitimation, or the process by which IOs transfer legitimacy onto the actions of states. While most scholars, policy-makers, and journalists agree that IOs do transfer legitimacy, they do not explain how this occurs.

Thompson explains this legitimation in terms of information transmission to foreign audiences, both leaders and their publics. IO approval signals to these audiences that an intervention policy is unthreatening and justified. He is gathering opinion data from around the world on attitudes toward the two wars (1990-1991 and 2003-present), and is interviewing foreign policy elites from the United States, Canada, Turkey, and Europe.

Through this project, Thompson explores a vital policy issue: Should coercive foreign policies be conducted unilaterally or multilaterally? The costs of multilateralism - the inefficiencies of collective decision-making - are well understood, while the costs of unilateralism -- often long-term and diffuse -- are not. How U.S. policy-makers negotiate these tradeoffs will have a lasting effect on international cooperation and goodwill.



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